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ABSTRACT

An all-encompassing definition of the traditional role of the Indian woman is hard to reach because that role changes with every tribal group. However, by examining one group, the Woodland Indians, an idea of the Indian woman's role can emerge. The "poor, overworked squaw" stereotype is erroneous, for early Indian men and women were regarded as equals. Indian women held positions of authority in civil and religious affairs. They usually decided when the camp would move and where it would relocate. Highly skilled as builders and architects, they owned their homes and the tools used in their duties of food gathering and preparation, soil cultivation, dressing skins, etc. Although their days were filled with many tasks, their responsibilities were no greater than that of the men, and they were assisted by the children, old people, and men unable to hunt. They were highly regarded and protected by their tribe. In addition to a lengthy description of the traditional role of the Indian woman, this document features a "Things to Do With Your Daughter" section which suggests discussions and other activities based on stereotypes; past and present roles of women; and famous Indian women, their contributions, strengths, and characteristics. (Author/DS)

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by Lois Mateucn Strong

illustrated by Vicki Wayman

Choices & Careers Free To Choose

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About The Author

Lois Metoxen Strong, an Oneida, has a B.S. degree in psychology from University of Wisconsin—La Crosse. She is prently the project director for Wisconsin Tribal Women, Incorporated. Vicki Wayman, a member of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewas, did the illustrations for the unit.

About The Program

"Being an Indian Woman" has been developed as part of the project Choices & Careers, Free to Choose, a career development project for tribal girls. The project was developed with the assistance of tribal women in Wisconsin and was funded with special needs funds from Extension Service-USDA.

W3P28

Being an Indian Woman
Traditional Roles

The traditional role of an Indian woman would be impossible to define because it depended on the tribal group to which she belonged. The role of a traditional Oneida woman would be somewhat different from a traditional Chippewa or Potawatomi or Menominee woman. This role was also dependent on the section of the country in which she lived. Indian women living in the desert would certainly have different things to do than women living in the Great Lakes area. It would be difficult to try to include each tribe because of the large amount of information. To help define the traditional role played by Indian women, the traditional role of Woodland Indian women will be discussed. Keep in mind that each tribal group had its own traditional roles for both men and women, and many of the tribes were as different as day and night.

When early white settlers wrote about Indians, they held many misconceptions. This was mosely because they never bothered asking the tribes about Indian traditions. These early authors were instrumental in starting the stereotypes that still exist. The following poem is a good example of this type of writing:

Pity the poor squaw,
Beast of burden, slave,
Chained under female law
from puberty to grave.
Anonymous

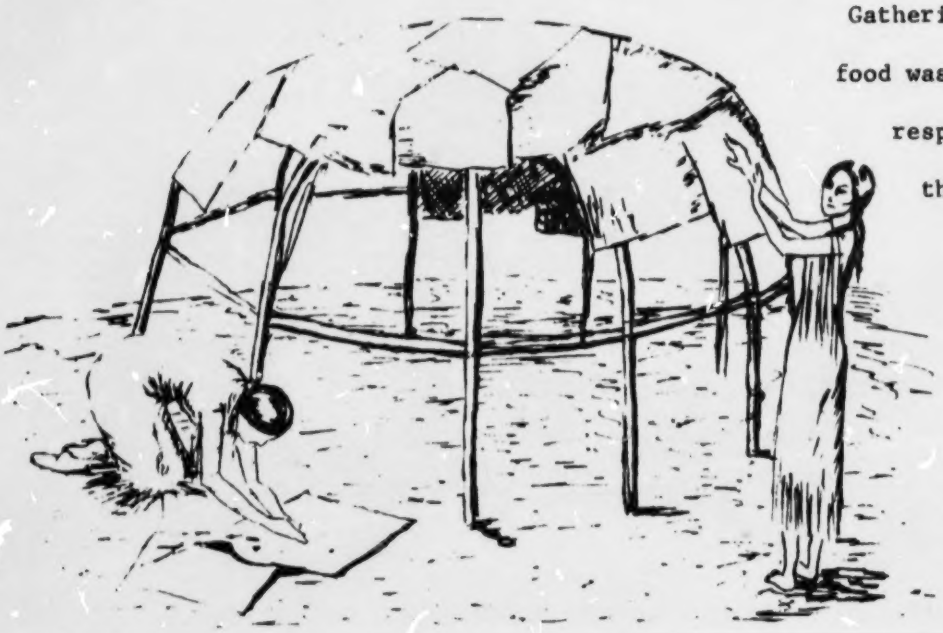
Where the author of this poem got his information is a mystery. The idea that an Indian woman was completely at the mercy of her tribal men is certainly without foundation, as well as the idea that she was nothing more than a beast of burden. Indian women were not only highly regarded and protected, but many occupied positions of authority in both civil and religious affairs.

In the early days, when the tribes were still strong, Indian men and Indian women treated one another as equals. This was a very difficult concept, which early white settlers never did understand. They wrote about early Indian life based on their own lifestyles. Consequently, these early authors did not realize that even though each tribal group had separate roles for men and women, the men never hesitated to help the women when it was needed or vise versa. Almost everything Indian people did was done as a family unit.

A traditional Indian woman's day began at dawn, and she seldom knew moments when some work was not waiting for her. If there was no cooking to be done, plants to be gathered, berries and nuts to be harvested, meat to be dried, and fish to be smoked, there was a basket to be finished, moccasins and clothing to be made, hides to be tanned and decorated with quills and painted designs, and packing to be done for travel or to accompany the men on a hunt. There were also the children and young people to be trained and dances and ceremonials to prepare for.

In all tribes, women were assisted in their work by young people

(male and female), by men unable to hunt because of an injury, and by older members of the tribe. For example, berry picking was generally the job of unmarried girls and old women. When an abundance was found, the whole family would join in so that the greatest possible amount could be preserved before spoilage occurred.



Gathering and preparing food was not the only responsibility of the women. In most of the tribes, women were both the architects and the builders of the houses. Their skill in constructing these dwellings was remarkable and each house was well adapted to the area and climate where they lived. Again they were assisted by other members of the family when actually putting up the dwelling.

The women were highly regarded by the men for their wisdom and knowledge of the ways of nature. When moving the camps, the women usually decided when the move was to be made and where the new camp was to be located. Indian women were always consulted and played an important role in all facets of Indian life.

The roles played by early Indian women were varied. Usually a girl's training for this began in childhood. Little girls were provided with dolls and small cradle boards and tiny dishes and baskets. Tots played

at cooking and caring for their babies in much the same manner as little girls do today. When a girl was five or six, she was taken by the older girls or grandmothers to gather berries, plants, and nuts. All girls, as soon as they were responsible—sometimes as early as seven years—were assigned regular household duties. Generally this meant caring for a younger member of the family. Also, at this age girls were expected to help cook the food, gather wood, or carry water from a nearby stream.

The division of labor and responsibilities between men and women were not cut and dried as historians and antnropologists have led us to believe. The women's share of responsibilities and obligations were not more than what was expected of the men. Even the responsibility of caring for the very young was considered to be a family obligation and not just the mother's.

The following are excerpts from the book, Indian Women of the Western Morning, by John Upton and Donna M. Terrell, which helps to define the roles of traditional Indian women:

"The concept that woman was made from man is not found in Indian religion. Indians accept and adhere to the doctrine that the female of their kind was created simultaneously with the male. For apparent reasons, each was endowed with peculiar qualities and sensibilities,

neither was accorded supremacy, and each was made dependent upon the other for existence." (Page 4) ". . .there is nothing in any Indian mythology to suggest the principle that man preceded woman." (Page 16)

"In no case in the tribes maintaining the clan system were women without property rights, both the right of personal ownership and the right to dispose of personal belongings by giving or willing them to sons and daughters. Weapons and ceremonial paraphernalia belonged to men, but implements used for cultivating the soil, for preparing food, for dressing skins, for making garments and tipis, and other household articles belonged to women. A woman could build and own a house, and among most people the lodge or tipi in which a family dwelt belonged to the mother. Only under the rarest of circumstances could the property of a woman be taken from her, and in most tribes she could under no condition be deprived of her possessions by her husband, even if their marriage was dissolved." (Page 29)

"White settlers in early colonial times saw that invariably an Indian man preceded his [wife] when walking along a road, a trail, or in a village, and so the legend was born that the woman was inferior in social status to the man, her lord and master, and therefore was required to show her respect by keeping behind him. In reality, the custom has nothing whatsoever to do with ethics, protocol, or rank. When walking or entering a community or a lodge, an Indian man went ahead of his wife expressly for the purpose of protecting her from unexpected danger—

in Indian idiom, 'to make the way safe for her.'" (Page 42)

"The large number of women's games and sports and societies enumerated in scientific studies makes it clear that most Indian women enjoyed . . . relief from arduous and routine duties. They attended what might be termed sewing bees, vied in quilling and weaving contests, and took part in numerous ceremonials and social functions from which men were excluded. A game of shinny in which a hair ball covered with buckskin and a curved stick were used was widely played by women. In another common woman's game, a ball was thrown with a long rod on whose end was a skin loop. In this contest a player was not permitted to touch the ball with the hands. It may be safely assumed that women also found time to engage in the popular pastime of gossip." (Page 46)

"Indian woman were well informed as to the comparative values of foods; they knew the nutritional benefits to be derived from certain plants and the dangers inherent in unbalanced diets. They knew that the finest food of all was

meat, but that meat alone did not answer all the demands of the body. Whatever they may have called protein, if indeed they defined it at all, they knew that its greatest source was meat. Thus, few meals were prepared without meat in some form, and among agricultural tribes, meats were usually served with maize [corn] or beans, secondary sources of protein. They understood as well, however, that other elements were needed to sustain good health, such things as starches, sugars, and fats. Many plants, both wild and domesticated, contained these substances." (Pages 67-68)

Growing Up To Be A Woman

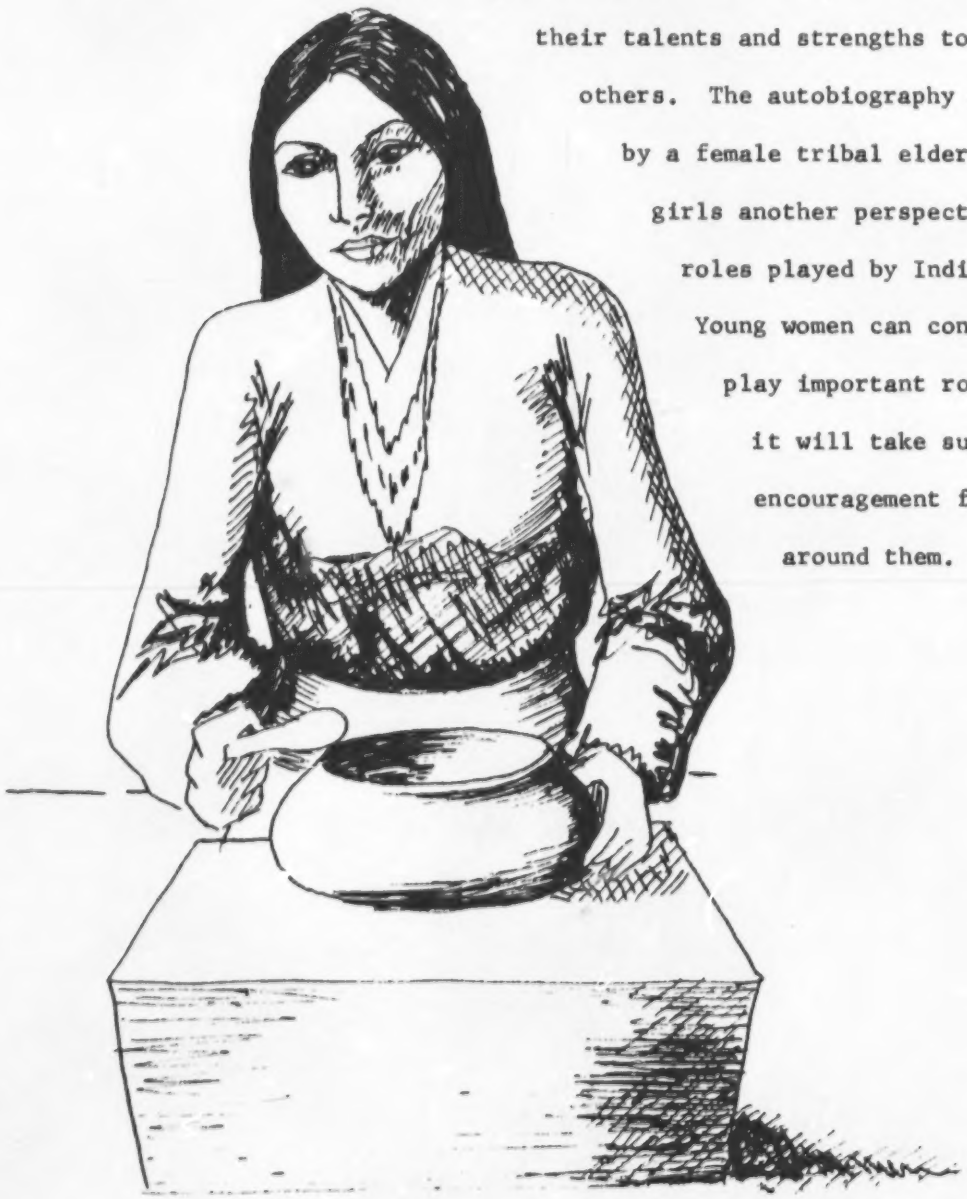
Growing Up to Be a Woman is a unit written by Clara DeCoteau. She is a Chippewa woman, born in 1909, who writes about the first 18 years of her life. She tells of her home, education and work experiences. Often she refers to her extended family and how they influenced her life. Music is a special area of interest to her and she relates how she developed her skill in this area.

While times have changed, girls can relate the experiences Mrs. DeCoteau writes about to their life today.

Famous Indian Women

This unit is about Famous Indian Women. Included are both women from the past and women from today. The accounts attempt to show a variety of careers and how and why each woman chose her profession. Women of the past are portrayed by the strengths and characteristics which helped them through their lives. There are many other women who could have been included; but this unit is designed to be just a small representation of famous Indian women.

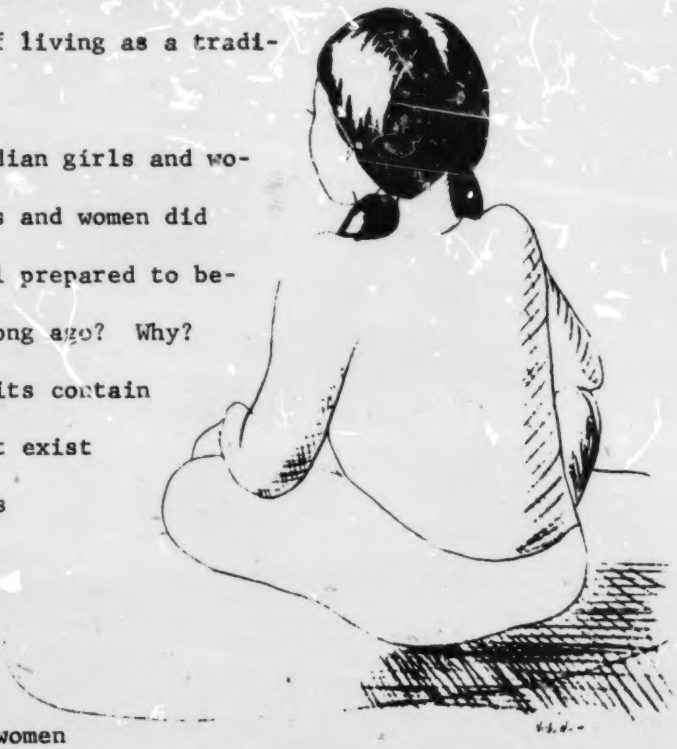
Indian women throughout the ages have played important roles. The biographies on historical and contemporary women is only a small representation of Indian women throughout the country who have put their talents to work. Indian women have been and are today leaders in areas such as government, health, education, and art. There is little material in history books on Indian women, but there is enough here to give the girls the idea that many Indian women used their talents and strengths to benefit others. The autobiography written by a female tribal elder gives girls another perspective on roles played by Indian women. Young women can continue to play important roles, but it will take support and encouragement from those around them.



THINGS TO DO WITH YOUR DAUGHTER

THINGS TO DO WITH YOUR DAUGHTER

Traditional Roles



1. Discuss the pros and cons of living as a traditional Indian woman.
2. Discuss and compare what Indian girls and women do today with what girls and women did long ago? Are girls as well prepared to become adults as girls were long ago? Why?
3. Both parents' and girls' units contain examples of stereotypes that exist about Indian women. Discuss these stereotypes with your daughter—how they harmed Indian women and the effect they have on Indian women today.
4. You and your daughter might enjoy finding out more about the traditional roles of other tribes or your particular tribe. The local school or public library in your area should be able to supply you with a list of resource books.

Famous Indian Women

1. You might enjoy reading through the booklet "Famous Indian Women" with your daughter.
2. After reading the booklet, you might like to use some of the following questions in discussing the biographies with your daughter.

a. What do you admire most about the women?

b. What are some of the characteristics or traits of the women?

c. What characteristics of these women would you like to have?

d. Which woman do you admire most? Why?

e. Does the career you have in mind resemble any careers of the women? How?

3. You and your daughter might enjoy discussing other women you know who you feel are "famous Indian women" too. What are the major contributions of these women—their strengths and characteristics?

Growing Up To Be A Woman

1. You might enjoy reading the booklet "Growing Up to Be a Woman" with your daughter.

2. There are questions at the end of the story that you could use with

your daughter to discuss the story.

3. After reading the booklet, you might like to share personal experiences of growing up with your daughter.

4. There are few written resources available on the subject of growing-up experiences of Indian women. You and your daughter might find it challenging to write a personal account of growing-up experiences.